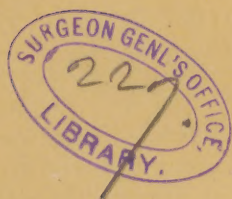


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Idiocy and its treatment.





IDIOCY AND ITS TREATMENT.

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The term idiot is applied to that class of persons whose intellectual development was arrested owing to mal-nutrition or disease of the nervous centres occurring before birth or before the evolution of the mental faculties in childhood, and is usually associated with some cranial malformation.

Idiocy may also be described as a condition in which the intellectual faculties are never manifested, or have never been developed sufficiently to enable the idiot to acquire such an amount of knowledge as persons of his own age and placed in similar circumstances with himself, are capable of receiving.

This weakness of the intellect and arrest of the psychical development usually depends upon a cerebral anomaly, a want of development, a pathological change in the brain or its membranes; yet there are many cases of idiocy where the weakness of perception does not depend upon organic changes, but originally upon a simple functional anomaly of the brain, induced by epilepsy, defective bodily nutrition, premature ossification of the sutures of the skull and a consequent prevention of the growth which normally takes place actively during the first years of life.

Idiocy has been classified by many writers, but that of Seguin is the most simple: "The chronic affection of a whole or a part of the central nervous masses, which is characterized as *profound idiocy*. A partial or total affection of the nervous apparatus which ramifies through the tissues and presides over the life of relation, the result of which is *superficial idiocy*." He also describes a class of cases under the head of "Backward Children," in whom there seems to be a mere functional torpidity of the nervous system.

Dr. Down, in a paper on "The Obstetrical Aspects of Idiocy," * observes, that, in twenty per cent. of the cases of idiocy collected by him, there was a history of marked disturbance of physical health of the mother during pregnancy; in four per cent., a history of serious falls, followed by alarming uterine hæmorrhage; in six per cent., prolonged ill health; in ten per cent., persistent sickness, which had occasioned anxiety. He regards vomiting during gestation as an important producer of idiocy. Again, in as many as thirty-two per cent of the cases, there was, as regards the mother, a history of fright, intense anxiety, or great emotional excitement.

Dr. Down † has made inquiries into the causes of idocy in two thousand cases, and found that in forty-five per cent. there were well marked neuroses in the families of one or both parents.

A very interesting table of the effects of consanguineous unions was made by Dr. Bemiss, of Louisville, Ky. From his table of aggregates, the following extract is made, the reader observing that Class A includes instances of marriage or incestuous intercourse between brother and sister, or parent and child; Class B, instances of marriage or incestuous intercourse between uncle and niece, or aunt and nephew; Class C, marriage between blood relations, who are themselves descendants of blood relations; Class D, marriage between double first cousins; Class E, marriage between first cousins; Class F, marriage between second cousins; Class G, marriage between third cousins; Class H, marriage irregularly reported, all first cousins.

| CLASSES. | No. observations in each class. | Unions sterile in each case. | Average number of births to each marriage. | PER CENT. CHILDREN. | | | | | | | | |
|------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---------------------|-------------------|--------|----------|---------|------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| | | | | Defective. | Deaf and Dumb. | Blind. | Idiotic. | Insane. | Epileptic. | Scrofulous. | Deformed. | Died young. |
| A..... | 10 | ... | 3.1 | 93.5 | ... | ... | 61.2 | ... | 3.2 | 16.1 | 35.4 | |
| B..... | 12 | 3 | 4.41 | 75.4 | 1.9 | 5.6 | 5.6 | 1.9 | 1.9 | 20.7 | 26.4 | 43.3 |
| C..... | 56 | 4 | 4.17 | 53.8 | 4.2 | 5.1 | 12.8 | 1.2 | 1.7 | 18.8 | 3.8 | 26.9 |
| D..... | 27 | ... | 5.7 | 27.2 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 2.5 | 3.8 | 1.2 | 6.3 | 1.2 | 35 |
| E..... | 580 | 40 | 4.8 | 24.9 | 4.2 | 2.2 | 8.3 | ... | 1.6 | 6.2 | 1.9 | 22.5 |
| F..... | 112 | 5 | 4.58 | 13 | 1.7 | ... | 3.3 | ... | 1.1 | 2.9 | 1.7 | 16.5 |
| G..... | 12 | ... | 4.91 | 27 | 5 | ... | 1.7 | 1.7 | 3.4 | 16.9 | | 13.5 |
| H..... | 24 | 1 | 5 | 17.5 | 2.5 | ... | 2.5 | 1.6 | ... | 12.5 | | 10 |
| Total..... | 833 | 53 | 4.46 | 28.7 | 3.6 | 21 | 7. | | 1.5 | 7.6 | 2.4 | 22.4 |

* *Transactions of the Obstetrical Society of London*, Vol. XVIII.

† *British Medical Journal*, Oct. 11, 1873.

It is to be noted that the number of defective births corresponds with the degree of consanguinity, except in the case of class G, where the number of observations was obviously too small to establish a rule.

Dr. Bemiss was satisfied that his researches gave him authority to assure that over ten per cent. of the deaf and dumb and over five per cent. of the blind, and nearly fifteen per cent. of the idiotic in State institutions for subjects of these defects, are the offspring of kindred parents, as of parents themselves the descendants of blood intermarriage.

A large proportion of idiots come of stock run down and exhausted by long perpetuation of vitiated constitutions, or long continuance of degrading and vicious habits.

Idiots and imbeciles are increasing in numbers at a rate greater than that of the general population. We also find that the present generation is more susceptible to stimulants and narcotic drugs, and that there is a great increase of the nervous diseases known as inebriety, hay-fever, neuralgia, nervous dyspepsia, and nervous exhaustion or neurasthenia.

Idiocy has always been, until within a few years, classified with insanity, but the two have no similarity, except in the fact that each represents an abnormal condition of the brain.

Esquirol, who classified idiocy with insanity, wrote that "the condition of a man in a state of dementia may change; that of an idiot is ever the same." It was then thought impossible that an idiot's intellectual faculties could be improved. But the education of this unfortunate class has, in modern times, so far modified its correctness, that it is no longer right to speak of the faculties of the idiot being doomed to remain stationary.

Dr. Seguin says that not one in a thousand has been entirely refractory to treatment; not one in a hundred who has not been made happy and healthy; more than thirty per cent. have been taught to conform to social and moral law, and rendered capable of order, of good feeling, and of working like the third of a man; more than forty per cent. have been capable of the ordinary transactions of life under friendly control, of understanding moral and social abstractions, of working like two-thirds of a man; and twenty-five per cent. come nearer and nearer to the standard of manhood, till some of them will defy the scrutiny of good judges when compared with ordinary young women and men.

Goltz found, in his recent investigations, that when he removed a great portion of the hemisphere on one side, the animal did not become idiotic or demented; but if he removed portions from either hemisphere, the animal showed a diminution of mental power, with loss of tactile sensibility and awkwardness in its movements. Dr. Ireland,* therefore, supposes that in idiots who improve under instruction, where the whole cerebrum is diseased, it in great part recovers its tone by being brought into healthy exercise, and that where a part still remains sound, it is thrown into more vigorous exercise than the rest, attracts a greater supply of blood, and gains a more vigorous nutrition than the surrounding parts.

Where the deficiency is congenital, the prognosis is often better than where it is traceable to diseases occurring in childhood; great improvement in the intelligence often follow improvement in the general health, as in the successful treatment of strumous and anæmic conditions.

Without training and education, idiots are an unproductive class; with it, their industrial capacity is greatly increased. The most zealous efforts of earnest teachers in the ordinary schools are ineffectual to meet the requirements of idiots, and it is only by teachers specially skilled and qualified for the duty that these unfortunates can be benefited, and under their care, in many cases, astonishing moral, intellectual and physical improvement can be accomplished.

The greatest difficulty of the teacher is to properly classify his pupils and to form an estimate of their mental power and guess at what stage to begin, what faculties can be most readily called into cultivation, and what most require training and exercise. The difficulty of individualization is the great objection to asylums. We know that the blind and deaf are rendered less educable by associating with others having the like infirmity. So with feeble-minded children, where only a few are associated together they can receive better care; and kind treatment, good diet and attention will improve the most hopeless cases. Their teaching requires judgment, study and experience, and must be modified to suit each particular case.

* *Edinburgh Rev.*, June, 1882.



